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AUTHOR Shavit, David
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ABSTRACT

Research on public libraries is conducted in library and information science schools, commercial firms, state library agencies, research institutes, and some public libraries and library systems. While a number of library science professionals demand research, there appears to be a lack of the communication of research results so that they may be used by practitioners. It is suggested that very little is known about what public library research gets used, by whom, for what purposes, and with what, if any, impact. That this problem has been recognized by the library community is evidenced by the fact that research utilization is included as one of the major items on the library and information science research agenda for the 1980s. Based on a review of literature, this paper describes methodologies that have been used in library research and suggests a variety of reasons why public librarians have not put the research findings to use, including: bibliographic methods for locating and disseminating public library research to practitioners are inadequate; the majority of knowledge utilized by public librarians is "soft knowledge," and empirical studies on the utilization of library research are few; many researchers are indifferent to the diffusion of their results; and public library research findings are often written in a form unacceptable to practitioners. The problem solving approach is described as the most common approach of public librarians to research. The paper concludes with recommendations for more effective dissemination and, therefore, utilization of public library research. (THC)

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UTILIZATION OF PUBLIC LI3RARY RESEARCH

David Shavit

Department of Library Science
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, Illinois 60115

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

"Producing data is one thing; getting it used is quite another." (House, 1972, 412).

"The capacity for acquiring knowledge is what distinguishes a man from a beast. The capacity for using knowledge is what distinguishes a man from a fool." (Dr Samuel Johnson, quoted in Rothman, 1980, 178).

Research on public library topics is conducted in library and information science schools, commercial firms, state library agencies, research institutes, and some public libraries and library systems.

On the one hand, there is an anvil chorus demanding research; on the other, paradoxically, there does not seem to be a market for public library research.

Research utilization is the process by which research results are produced to answer practitioners' needs, and communicated to practitioners for their use (Agarwala-Rogers, 1977). "Utilization involves the establishment of linkage between information processing that occurs in research-producing systems." (Beyer and Trice, 1982, 602). There is a body of research-based knowledge about the public library that has not been put to use. Not much is known about the diffusion of public library research findings to, and their utilization by, practicing librarians in public libraries. There is minimal evidence to suggest that research findings directly influence the quality of public library service. This is even truer of research in other fields, such as economics, political science, etc., which might be relevant to public library service.

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We know very little about what public library research gets used, by whom, for what purposes, and with what, if any, impact. It is ironic that a field that addresses itself so much to the study of information transfer and knowledge utilization in other disciplines, has not investigated itself. It is also ironic that libraries and information centers, which are in the communication business, have not been able to communicate research to the field in meaningful ways.

That this problem continues to be considered significant by the library community can be seen by the fact that research utilization has been included as one of the major items on the library and information science research agenda for the 1980s. (Cuadra Associates, 1982).

METHODOLOGY

Pelz (1978) identified three types of research use: instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic. Instrumental use involves acting on research results in specific, direct ways. Conceptual use involves using research results for general enlightenment; results influence actions, but in less specific, more indirect ways than instrumental use. Symbolic use involves using research results to legitimate and sustain predetermined positions.

Weiss (1981, 26-31) suggests four approaches for studying the utilization of research:

(1) Tracing the impact of studies on decisions through case studies based on organization records and interviews

(2) Surveying a sample of prospective users of research through

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interviews

(3) Examining the ways in which research helped shape the resolution of an issue through review of documents and research studies relevant to the issue

(4) Investigating the impact of research on the life history of an organization through participant observation

The major question answered by the second approach is how much use do certain kinds of librarians make of research? Since the main interest is the utilization of library research by public librarians, a survey of prospective users was selected as the most relevant methodology. A similar methodology was used by Glaser & Taylor (1973), Rich (1977), Knorr (1977), and Patton et al. (1977).

Intensive interviews were conducted with 25 directors of public libraries of various sizes. The interviews were open-ended and ranged in length from one-half hour to two hours, averaging about one hour. The questions fell into several major categories as follows:

1. Respondents' awareness of available, relevant public library research information; their knowledge and use of research; and their information retrieval practices.

2. Respondents' self-reported use of public library research knowledge in library situations. Probes were made following each reported utilization instance to determine the specific information involved, the problem involved, and the impact of the information on the problem.

3. Respondents' evaluation of the worth of various kinds of library science data, data collection methods and measurement

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procedures, and the degree of confidence which they placed on findings from library science and other disciplines.

4. Respondents' attitudes about the use of library science research and their beliefs about the factors that influence the use of such knowledge in public library policies and practices.

FINDINGS

Is there a significant amount of research dealing with public library service? Defining research in critical terms, Garrison (1980) found that 193 research projects were carried out in the 1970s. Forty-seven percent of these projects were doctoral dissertations. Indeed, public librarians often think of library research only in terms of doctoral dissertations.

Garrison concluded that "there is a lot to be desired in the bibliographic apparatus for locating public library research, either completed or in progress, and that even more is lacking in getting the results of public library research to the attention of practitioners in a systematic way." He further stated that "the impact of this research [done in the 1970s] is blunted by poor bibliographical control mechanisms, poor availability of copies, and a failure to synthesize or rewrite research findings in a form available to, and acceptable to, practitioners." (Garrison, 1980, 8).

Such complaints are not restricted to library and information science. A social work researcher has stated:

> The relationship between practice and research in social work has always been an uneasy one. More often than not, it has been unbalanced and one-sided. Researchers have

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> frequently complained that practitioners ignore their obviously pertinent and important findings. In fact, researchers have worried so much about the problem that they have written papers and held conferences on the subject. Practitioners, for their part, sometimes go for days, months, and, in some cases, years without even a moment's thought about social work research, let alone about whether or how to use it in their work. Such differences in interest hardly provide a sound base for a close and mutually satisfying relationship. To a marriage counselor, the prognosis for such a relationship would be "guarded." (Briar, 1978, 31).

Public librarians recognize the distinction between the two types of information: hard knowledge - "research-based, usually quantitative, and couched in scientific language," and soft knowledge - "non-research based, qualitative, and couched in lay language" (Caplan et al., 1975, 18). There is no question that the majority of knowledge utilized by public librarians is soft knowledge. Empirical studies on the utilization of library research are, however, few.

One of the problems is the indifference of many researchers to the diffusion of their results, and the fact that many researchers consider it improper for them to purvey their results. Beyer and Trice (1982) emphasize the fact that the flow of information between researchers and potential users is problematic because researchers do not take the initiative in establishing a linkage between the two groups. Library researchers must be more vigorous and aggressive in promoting their findings. Researchers should advocate their ideas. Practitioners must also take the initiative to establish links with researchers. "Generally, however, users are not urged to be more active and skilled in searching for research information relevant to their needs and concerns. The predominant underlying theory seems to be analogous to supply-side economics: improve

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the supply of research information and assume that demand for it will thereby increase." (Beyer and Trice, 1982, 603).

Regardless of the criteria they have used in defining research, both Lynch (1982) and Garrison (1982) were concerned mainly with hard knowledge. Lynch thinks that the public library practitioner community recognized the importance of research at an early point in the 1970s, because the second recommendation of the report on the proposed public library feasibility study at that time was that "a program of extensive research and investigation will be required to provide needed knowledge for effective performance." The third recommendation advocated "continued coordination to insure wide dissemination of the results of the research, the development of prototypes and application in real life through demonstration." (Public Library Association, 1972). But as Lynch herself states: "Unfortunately, nothing much happened as a result of those recommendations." (1982, 13).

A recently conducted study of the dissemination of research among librarians in Great Britain only strengthens these conclusions. Concerning librarians employed by local government, a group consisting mainly of public librarians, the research found that only 10 percent were very interested in research items in journals and 56 percent had little or no interest. Only 1 percent frequently had seen research reports in his own field, 42 percent rarely saw them, and 21 percent never saw them. Only 15 percent of local government librarians had ever done any library-information research themselves. One percent were well

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informed of current research in the library-information field, 47 percent had a rough idea, but 39 percent were not really informed. Eight percent were interested greatly in library-information research, 18 percent were interested fairly, 47 were interested moderately, but 21 percent were interested little. (Lynam et al., 1982).

It appears that many librarians see their problems as unique and unlikely to be aided substantially from what has been learned from research. Personal contacts are used frequently in seeking help rather than documents. (cf. Muthard and Crocker, 1975).

Non-utilization of research is not unique to library science. It is true with other professions as well. Ketefian (1975, 91) found that that "the [nursing] practitioner either was totally unaware of the research literature relative to her practice, or if she was aware of it, was unable to relate to it or utilize it." Social workers have the same problem. Rosenblatt (1969) established the fact that social workers tended not to utilize research as a guide to their practice or even to read research articles. More recent studies have concluded that the increased statistical sophistication of published research may have exacerbated the problem, and that practitioners have become less literate and their ability to read technical research has declined (Fanshel, 1980). Kirk summarized the situation as follows:

> Social workers ... profess a high regard for research, but they don't like to study research; they seldom use research studies in their professional work or to improve their skills; their professional reading is not research oriented; they are not likely to conduct research after leaving school; and they have considerable difficulty accepting research with negative findings. (Kirk, 1979, 9).

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A Strategy for Public Library Change concluded that while "the amount of substantive information located was encouraging;, the inaccessibility of many of the items a major frustration." (1972, 58). In his survey of the research on public library problems in the 1970s, Garrison reached a similar conclusion when he stated: "The results of my research convinced me anew that there is a lot to be desired in the bibliograp[hic apparatus for locating public library research, either completed or in progress, and that even more is lacking in getting the results of public library research to the attention of practitioners in a systematic way." (Garrison, 1980, 5). Considering the fact that 47 percent of the public library research located by Garrison were doctoral dissertations and another 21 percent were Title II-B projects, which are all poorly disseminated, they stand little chance of reaching practitioners. Public library research findings must be synthesized and rewritten in a form available to, and acceptable to, practitioners. (Garrison, 1980, 8). The results of this study confirm Garrison's as well as Sullivan's (1984) conclusions.

"Both researchers and practitioners are handicapped by the prevailing norms of a profession that seems content with news reports and opinion pieces in its journals to the near exclusion of research data. The research journals that do exist seem not to reach many practitioners and tend to be regarded ... not as sources that report current findings and link them to a community of researchers interested in public library problems." (Garrison, 1980, 8). "... [I]deas about better outreach programs in public

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libraries or how to conduct reference interviews have usually been based on observation and practice, the gathering of many comments and recommendations, and reporting them to a wider audience, rather than on the development of ideas in the abstract and dissemination of them as responses to a commonly recognized problem." (Sullivan, 1984).

The most common approach of public librarians to research is the problem solving approach. When faced with a problem, public librarians;

1. Contact directors of other area public libraries. Most of the help in solving a problem comes from other libraries that have gone through the same problem. These libraries are almost always surrounding public libraries.

Public librarians feel that libraries of similar size, located in the neighborhood, provide the best solution.
In their attitude and behavior toward research, public librarians demonstrate the same behavior as that shown by the general public toward using the public library, a behavior about which public librarians are concerned.

2. After consulting other libraries, public librarians might go to the system. However, few of the public libraries investigated utilized system consultants, and the system was never used as a first recourse.

One consideration for surveying local public libraries in case of a problem is the impact of the findings on the library board. Library boards generally do not care what public libraries in other areas of the country are doing. Library boards, as well as public librarians, do not feel that library research dealing

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with other areas of the country is relevant to their prc m. Public librarians find library research of limited usefu ss, because they feel that their libraries and situations are unique and library research conducted in other institutions does not apply to their situation. There is a feeling among many public librarians that only information collected from local and regional sources is relevant. They believe that their problems are more localized and specific than those addressed by research publications. Many public librarians also feel that their boards are conservative and unwilling to try new ideas. Many public librarians often are reluctant to try new ideas on their own. Only when such ideas receive the imprimatur of the ALA, the state library association or the state library agency, or if the system picks up an idea and recommends it as the direction which public libraries should follow, do most public librarians (some reluctantly) adopt them. The examples of such adopted ideas given by most librarians are the planning process and output measures.

Only rarely do public librarians go to the literature. When they do, often it is to look for research findings and arguments to support a position. One public library director conducted a search of the literature for position papers requested by the library board. The search satisfaction was minimal at best. As a result, personal contact was used and proved to be more relevant.

Public librarians seldom conduct and utilize library research. Most public libraries do not subscribe to library research periodicals. Indeed, they only subscribe to a few popular library

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periodicals. Public librarians have no access to most of the published and unpublished library professional material (only two of the 25 public libraries surveyed subscribed to Library Literature). The only publications mentioned specifically by public librarians were those published by the American Library Association. Even when they used library journals, public library directors were interested primarily in reports of experiences in other libraries which appear in the popular library journals.

The most commonly given reason (or excuse!) for not utilizing library research is lack of time: lack of time to read research, and lack of time to implement new ideas. Public librarians "are very busy with daily little things and never get to the big picture." Public librarians know that they should read library research, but do not have the time, or do not make time available. Motivation is needed to plow through research reports, and public librarians rarely have this motivation, since day-to-day administration takes a lot of their time.

Public librarians agree that college and university libraries do a better job in research, but public librarians feel that college and research libraries are in greater need of research. There is a lot of pressure in public libraries whereas the pace in academic libraries is more leisurely. Public librarians also feel that they have broader responsibilities than academic librarians. But probably the major factor is that the whole atmosphere regarding research is different in academic and public libraries. Would public librarians conduct more research if they were given time and encouragement to do so? Only a few public library directors believe that this would happen.

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Another reason mentioned by public library directors not utilizing library research is that library literature is so theoretical and is produced in "an ivory tower." Library researchers sometimes try to overwhelm readers with their knowledge. They use too many statistical methodologies. Information in research publications is frequently couched in such technical jargon that it is almost unintelligible to most practitioners, unfamiliar with the data collection procedures or statistical analysis used by the researcher. Research reports may be interesting but they have no practical value.

When asked to give a specific example of research utilized by their library, most public library directors were unable to do so. Sometimes they would mention a specific research report (generally soft research) which they had read generally in popular library literature), or with which they were familiar from personal experience. Some librarians also insisted that they are able to use some ideas from the literature.

Public librarians are divided in their opinion regarding library research. The majority of public librarians feel that library research is not very meaningful to them; only a few feel that library research is meaningful. There is some mistrust of library research, but most public librarians have confidence in it. A major problem is the lack of understanding of statistical methods and the unfamiliarity of research methods.

An additional problem is the fact that much public library research is geared to very large public libraries (those serving a population over 100,000). Furthermore, public librarians feel

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that research does not address their day-to-day problems.

Public librarians are completely unaware of research on public libraries done by non-librarians appearing in non-library journals.

In general, little interest in library research is found among public library practitioners. Public library directors often state that they do not use a lot of library research. Indeed, they do not read much library research. Most public librarians also feel that they do not have the background to read or utilize such research. Many public librarians also do not have the background to evaluate research. A common complaint expressed by public library directors is that researchers do not deal with problems of interest to public libraries. Public librarians do not see library research as useful and relevant, since they are interested only in research related to their problems. Public librarians also feel that a lot of library research is extremely trivial, and that little of it is practical.

Research does not work its way down to the local level. The systems could play a significant role in disseminating research findings, but they have not done so, although some systems have developed a collection of professional literature. The systems have not been the first recourse of action for public libraries with a problem. Sometimes libraries (particularly small ones) will go to the consultant in the system, and the system will do research on a particular topic for a public library.

Researchers and practitioners view research differently, and the link between the researcher and the practitioner is missing. Such a linkage would take research and make it usable to

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practitioners.

Public librarians have few ideas regarding research that is lacking. Asked what research projects are needed and which they would have liked to see, few public librarians mentioned specific items. The items mentioned dealt mainly with current problems faced by public libraries, such as alternate funding, collective bargaining, etc.

Public librarians also complain that library research does not tell them what to do. Public librarians voice a complaint similar to that made by Davis regarding a research article on education appearing in a sociological journal. Commenting on the absence of nonacademic implications in academic research. Davis concluded:

> ... the article has virtually nothing to say with policy implications, direct or indirect. By which I mean this: If I were a person with enormous authority or influence in public schools, there is nothing in the article that would persuade me to favor one course of action over another. (Davis, 1975, 234).

It is true that principles and ideas can be gleaned from research reports devoid of practical implications, but this cannot be done by most public library practitioners.

As Shaughnessy commented: "The main problem confronting the profession with regard to research does not appear to be what to do, but rather how to communicate the results of research to the field in meaningful ways." (1976, 52). For example, very few public librarians reported reading the abstracts of the ERIC documents reviewed in Public Libraries, and fewer reported utilization of these documents.

Sullivan stated recently that by and large, librarians "do

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not engage in, read, nor benefit from research in their own field." (1984, 34). This study further confirms this observation.

CONCLUSIONS

Due to practitioners' attitudes toward research, publication of a research report in a scholarly or professional journal does not constitute effective dissemination. Doctoral dissertations, reports produced by governmental and other agencies, even when published in ERIC, cannot be considered to have been disseminated effectively to public library practitioners.

Reports of library research must stimulate the interest of public librarians; but they must also take into consideration practitioners' attitudes, time constraints, and their administrative habits. Better ways to disseminate public library research are needed. Researchers should use more imaginative, concise, and personal techniques of transmitting research results.

Dissemination of library research must include research reported in non-library and information science journals.

Library researchers should be made aware of practitioners' needs. There is a need for more cooperation between researchers and practitioners. Practitioners must be involved, and should play a part in library research. The new Coalition for Library Research can be a first step in this direction. Research utilization conferences in which both researchers and practitioners participate would be considered useful. But

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such conferences must have practical objectives.

More research should be done about medium and small public libraries, and the libraries should be involved in such research.

There must be better linkage between researchers and practitioners. Library research must be disseminated in a more readable form. The emphasis in such dissemination must not be on the methodology, but on the results. Research findings must be translated from research terminology into English and into terms meaningful to public libraries and librarians and related to their situation.

A selected list of articles and reports of research on given topics of interest and relevance to public libraries, extensively annotated, should be published periodically. Research reports should be rewritten in clear and simple language. Jargon should be eliminated. Annotations should be brief, readable, relevant and attractively presented. Such a publication could be in a format similar to that of the Library Administrator's Digest, the periodical mentioned as being read by most public library directors.

An annual reference tool, reporting on research on public libraries has also been suggested by public library practitioners. Again, the reports must be down to earth.

Library and information science needs to develop methods of defining and measuring research utilization. More empirical investigations are required into the process of research utilization in public libraries as well as other types of libraries. Some possible projects and the methodologies to execute them have been recommended in the Cuadra Associates'

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study (1982), and it is hoped that they could be implemented.

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